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SUBJECT: UNIFIL WANTS TO APPLY GHAJAR MODEL TO SHEBAA FARMS

REF: A. BEIRUT 819  
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1153

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: July's explosion of a Hizballah arms depot in Khirbet Selim raised questions about the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) attitude, but the LAF has applied the lessons learned from the incident, according to UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) Director of Political and Civil Affairs Milos Strugar. The IDF, the LAF and Hizballah all want to keep UNIFIL troop levels stable, Strugar claimed. Only 4,800 of the requested 15,000 LAF troops are deployed in UNIFIL's area of operations, Strugar said, but most of them are committed even though they lack mobility. The main factor limiting LAF effectiveness is a lack of political support from Lebanese leaders, he said, but he insisted that the UNIFIL and LAF deployments have been "very effective" in putting Hizballah on the defensive. Strugar questioned Israeli resolve to withdraw from occupied Ghajar, but he predicted that if UNIFIL succeeds there, it will seek to replicate that success in the Shebaa Farms area. Strugar praised the trilateral meetings between the LAF, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and UNIFIL for achieving modest victories that have enhanced UNIFIL's credibility and encouraged a practical approach on both sides. End Summary.

LAF APPLIED LESSONS OF KHIRBET SELIM AT TAYR FELSAYH  
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[1](#)2. (C) July's explosion of a Hizballah arms depot in Khirbet Selim (ref A) raised "many questions about the LAF's attitude on the ground," Strugar told polchief on November 11. Strugar alleged that both operational and intelligence information from the field was slow to reach senior LAF commanders, but he termed it a "tactical, not strategic" problem. The LAF reacted negatively to the UNIFIL report's criticism of its performance at Khirbet Selim even though the report had "played down" the issue, Strugar said. The incident taught the LAF that it must react quickly, Strugar explained, adding that the LAF later applied the lessons learned at Tayr Felsayh (ref B). On the mysterious Tayr Felsayh incident, Strugar said that the LAF has rejected UNIFIL requests to question those involved on the basis that a military police investigation is ongoing. UNIFIL expects that it will only receive written reports in the end.

[1](#)3. (C) Although the press is promoting the idea that conflict

between Israel and Hizballah is inevitable, Strugar assessed that the atmosphere in the south does not favor conflict. The heightened rhetoric is a result of the regional atmosphere, he believed. It is not in Israel's interests to push the situation to a conflict, Strugar opined, although he expected Israel to maintain pressure in response to Hizballah-related incidents. Whatever the Israelis say, he asserted, they recognize that they, too, were unable to prevent Hizballah activity in the south prior to their withdrawal in 2000.

#### NO ONE WANTS REDUCTION IN UNIFIL DEPLOYMENT

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14. (C) The IDF, the LAF and Hizballah all want to keep UNIFIL levels stable, Strugar claimed. IDF General Gaby Ashkenazi told UNIFIL that any reduction in force would be a mistake at this stage and recommended no changes for two years. According to Strugar, Ashkenazi said Israel could defend itself alone, but UNIFIL is a key stabilizing factor in Lebanon. LAF commanders emphasize UNIFIL's stabilizing role and highlight the LAF's inability to backfill UNIFIL should it draw down, Strugar said. For its part, Hizballah "inquires" with UNIFIL every time the press reports that European troop levels will fall. Even so, troop contributing countries are beginning to ask, "How long?", he said, and the French might draw down if another clash between UNIFIL and residents like that at Khirbet Selim occurs. As part of the hand-over of UNIFIL's command, Strugar reported, Italy will withdraw 400 command staff, then "further." UNIFIL is pressing the incoming Spanish for "full support of mission requirements," but "Madrid might not understand" the commitment required, he assessed.

#### LAF UNDERMANNED AND POORLY OUTFITTED

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15. (C) Only 4,800 of the requested 15,000 LAF troops are deployed in UNIFIL's area of operations (AOR), Strugar noted. The level reached a high of 8,000 in 2006, but the Nahr al-Barid conflict, clashes in Beirut, military deployments in the Bekaa, and the elections took their toll. If the LAF were to deploy three heavy brigades vice normal brigades in UNIFIL's AOR, as they plan, the total might reach 6,000 troops, which Strugar assessed as "probably the most the LAF could do." The LAF calculates its troop deployments differently than UNIFIL, he said, adding 4,000 support troops north of the Litani River and others in Saida to the total. The LAF view is that incidents in the south, such as rocket launches, begin outside of UNIFIL's AOR, so those troops are working on the same mission. Even so, Strugar assessed that the LAF cannot achieve 15,000 troops in the region.

6, (C) Only 20% of UNIFIL patrols are conducted jointly with the LAF because the LAF has no mobility or reliable vehicles, Strugar said. During foot patrols, UNIFIL troops have three rations but LAF troops only one, so the patrols have to stop for the LAF troops to eat. During Counter Rocket Launch Operations, he added, the LAF loses the element of surprise because it has no communications system and its old vehicles give away its position. The LAF is seeking to link each of its brigades in the AOR with three sectors headed by the Italians, Spanish, and the French. Each country would "adopt" a brigade to improve coordination, he said.

#### GOL SHOULD RECLAIM THE SOUTH

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17. (C) Its capacity is limited, but the LAF is committed, Strugar judged. The main factor limiting its effectiveness is a lack of political support, he said. The GOL missed an opportunity by ceding the south to Hizballah and others after 2006, he explained, and the residents are hungry for an effective government presence. No government officials have visited the south recently and no one spoke up after Khirbet Selim, The new government will have a chance to make an impact, he believed, but it should begin to show a presence even without a "big plan." As a start, the prime minister

should speak publicly to condemn security incidents, he said.

18. (C) UNIFIL and LAF deployments have been "very effective" in putting Hizballah on the defensive, Strugar claimed. Since 2006, Hizballah has abandoned its positions on the Blue Line, as well as bunkers and checkpoints. Although it will always try to smuggle weapons, he said, it cannot rebuild its defensive infrastructure south of the Litani with UNIFIL and the LAF present. Hizballah has also been on the defensive politically since taking over Beirut and other regions in May 2008, he assessed. The organization is reacting and defending its position, but its only defense in the south is to point to frequent Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty.

#### UNIFIL SEES ROLE IN RESOLVING GHAJAR AND SHEBAA FARMS

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19. (C) An Israeli failure to withdraw from occupied Ghajar would be a "disaster," Strugar believed. The GOL's commitment to the UNIFIL plan -- in which UNIFIL would assume control of the Lebanese part of the village -- is strong, but the IDF claims that the decision on the Israeli side has moved to the political level over the issue of how to provide services to the Israeli citizens who would remain in Lebanon.

Strugar proposed that UNIFIL negotiate directly with the GOI concerning services for those remaining. The UNIFIL plan is complicated by the facts that the village's residents do not welcome the UNIFIL presence and the GOL will want to express its sovereignty in some way.

110. (C) UNIFIL is keen to succeed in Ghajar because a success there would set a precedent for the Shebaa Farms area, Strugar asserted. Although Shebaa Farms is outside of UNIFIL's mandate, if both parties asked, UNIFIL could provide a peacekeeping force to occupy the disputed territory, he said. A withdrawal from Shebaa would strengthen the LAF's political cover, undermine Hizballah's raison d'etre, and weaken the organization's political relationship with its nationalist Christian allies, he assessed. Israel has sought to link Shebaa to negotiations with Lebanon, but that position is "unrealistic" because of internal, Syrian and Palestinian pressures, he said. The Israelis, he recommended, should consider the issue in a "strategic" context. A UNIFIL presence in Shebaa would be simpler than one in Ghajar, he pointed out, since the area is uninhabited.

UNIFIL has not yet raised its Shebaa proposal in the tripartite meeting, but it might do so if it succeeds in Ghajar.

#### TRIPARTITE AT THE HEART OF UNIFIL'S SUCCESS

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111. (C) The tripartite meetings between the LAF, the IDF and UNIFIL are particularly useful, Strugar emphasized, because of their flexibility, their basis in consensus, and their privacy. Although the mechanism might be expanded in the future, it should remain low profile, he said. Strugar listed the successes of the tripartite: stemming smuggling in Ghajar, obtaining an LAF admission that it erred during the Khirbet Selim incident, and negotiating road construction along the Blue Line. The tripartite also resolved several disputes in the Kfar Shouba area, although it is outside UNIFIL's mandate. The victories are modest, he admitted, but they have enhanced UNIFIL's credibility and encouraged a practical approach on both sides.

DAUGHTON